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# Column: Can Stanford tell the difference between scientific fact and fiction? Its pandemic conference raises doubts

Jonathan Levin, the newly appointed president of Stanford, seen here speaking at a forum at the university's business school in April, when he was the school's dean. Was his hope fulfilled that a campus conference on pandemic policies would "repair the rifts" between people with divergent views? (Jeff Chiu / Associated Press)

**By Michael Hiltzik**
Business Columnist

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On Oct. 4, Stanford University's newly minted president, Jonathan Levin, opened an on-campus conference about pandemic policies by expressing the hope that the proceedings would "bring together people with different

perspectives, engage in a day of discussion, and in that way, try to repair some of the rifts that opened during COVID."

He was followed to the lectern by the conference organizer, Stanford public policy professor Jay Bhattacharya, who described the event's goal as fostering "dialogue with one another rather than having a situation where the goal is to destroy people who disagree with you."

He said he hoped that the conference would be a "model" for how to bring together people of divergent views.

> *Science and quackery cannot be treated as having scientific and moral equivalence.*
>
> **— John P. Moore, Weill Cornell Medical College**

If only it were. Within minutes of their opening remarks, their hopes were exploded.

That happened during the conference's opening panel, which was labeled "Evidence-Based Decision Making During a Pandemic."

Turning the conversation to the issue of COVID's origins, panelist Andrew Noymer, who teaches about population health and disease prevention at UC Irvine, launched into a fact-free attack on Anthony Fauci, the former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Fauci has become a target of relentless smears by right-wingers and congressional Republicans.

"I believe," Noymer said, "that the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus are that it's ... an experimental virus that escaped from a lab and Tony Fauci is intimately linked to the funding for experiments that created this virus."

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There's no evidence that the virus escaped from a lab, much less that Fauci as NIAID director funded any experiments that created the virus. No one on the panel called Noymer to account.

A few other low points during the day reflected the organizers' having invited conspiracy mongers and purveyors of long-debunked claims to share the stage with public health and science professionals who have spent the last few years battling a tide of misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic.

Stanford posted videos of all the conference panels and speeches on its website and on YouTube on Friday, expanding the potential audience beyond the few hundred people who attended the event in person.

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### Column: Stanford throws a party for purveyors of misinformation and disinformation about COVID

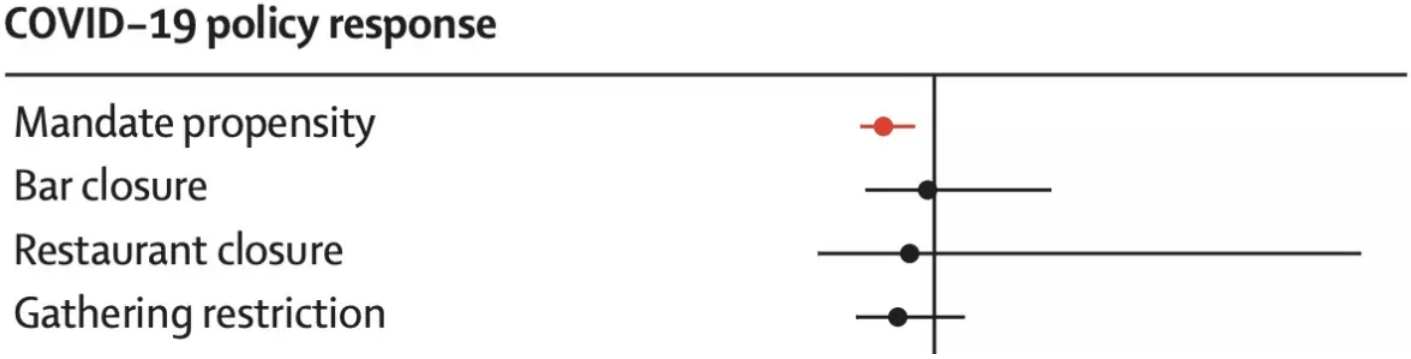
Aug. 29, 2024

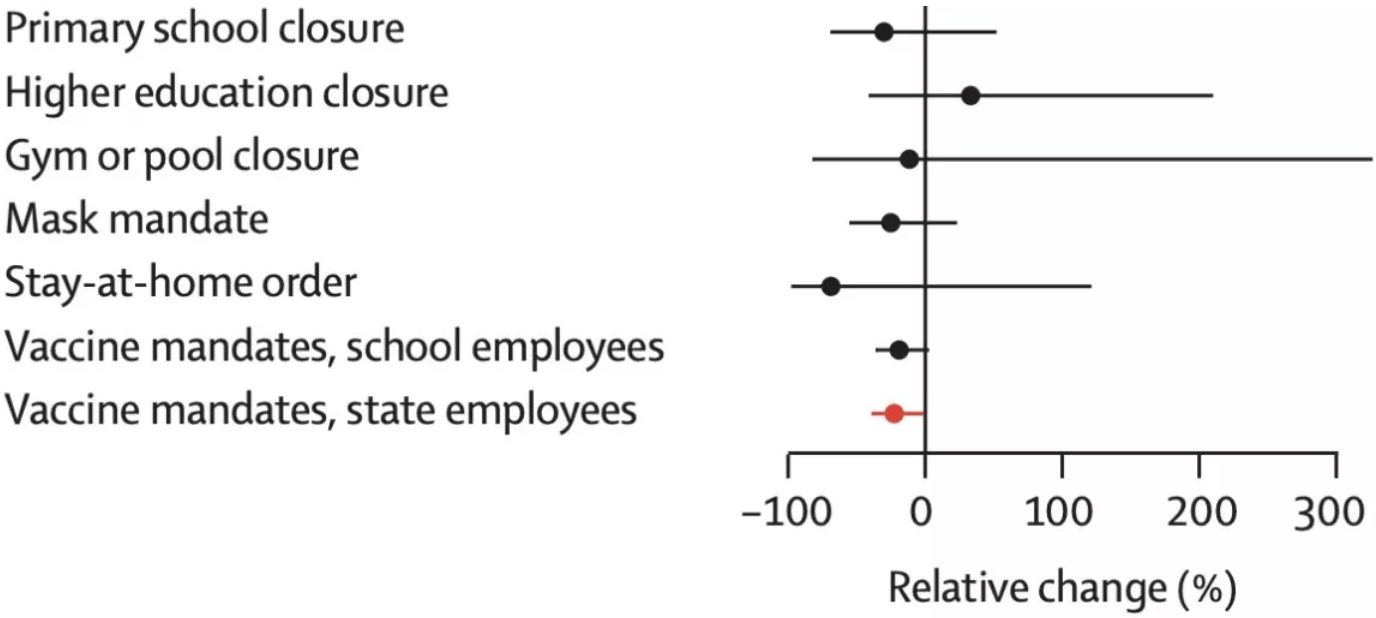
As I mentioned in an earlier column about the conference, the idea that universities such as Stanford should be arenas for airing all opinions in a search for truth is simplistic and historically incorrect. Universities have always had, and even embraced, the duty to draw the line between fact and fiction — to determine when an assertion or opinion falls below the line of intellectual acceptability.

"Science and quackery cannot be treated as having scientific and moral equivalence," John P. Moore, a distinguished biologist and epidemiologist at Weill Cornell Medical College who played a part in debunking misinformation about the role of HIV in AIDS during the 1990s, wrote recently. "Do NASA scientists attend conferences by people who believe the moon-landing was faked? Do geographers and geologists attend conferences held by idiots who believe the earth is flat?Of course not."

Stanford did some things right. After the initial conference agenda was published in August, it was criticized on social media and in the science community (and by me) for mainstreaming an "anti-science agenda (and revisionist history)," in the words of vaccine expert and pseudoscience debunker Peter Hotez.

Several more participants were added to the final roster in a possible effort to balance the lineup. (It may be that the organizers approached some of them before the original announcement came under attack.)






What worked to reduce the infection rate from COVID? According to researchers, bar, restaurant, school and gym closures; mask and vaccine mandates; and stay-at-home orders. (Bollyky et. al, The Lancet)

This effort bore fruit. In the first session, for example, health policy experts Douglas K. Owens and Josh Salomon of Stanford's medical school educated their fellow panelists in the realities of crafting social policies in the first months of a deadly pandemic with little-understood medical characteristics or health implications.

Yet a persistent subtext of the conference was that the social interventions taken against the pandemic, such as business and school closings, mask and social distancing advisories and lockdowns, were generally worse than the disease. This echoed the position of Bhattacharya, a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto published in October 2020 that called for ending lockdowns and school closures and pursuing "herd immunity" through "natural infection" of almost everyone other than the aged and infirm.

During the opening panel, moderator Wilk Wilkinson, a blogger on the concept of "personal accountability," offered the astonishing criticism that public health leaders "focused very narrowly on deaths from COVID, and often it came at the expense of other social values" such as "being able to visit people,

... or putting children in school as they normally would go to school, or attend funerals."

It fell to Salomon to observe tactfully that "in the early part of the pandemic, in March 2020, "it made sense to focus on mortality. We all saw ... the stacks of body bags in New York City." Over time, he said, social trade-offs from public health interventions can be weighed, as they are today. But if there's a higher imperative for public health officials than reducing deaths from a deadly pandemic while it is in full cry, what is it?

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As it happens, researchers have found that social interventions did succeed in reducing infections and mortality, a conclusion that was barely mentioned at the conference.

COVID death rates in U.S. states were reduced by restaurant, gym and pool shutdowns, vaccine mandates for school and government workers, and stay-at-home orders, according to a massive study published by the British medical journal The Lancet in April 2023. Infection rates were reduced by bar, restaurant and primary school closures; mask mandates; restrictions on large gatherings; stay-at-home orders; and vaccine mandates.

Social policies in place during the pandemic are easy to denigrate because their costs were evident but their positive effects were often invisible, Salomon observed. "It's harder for us to recognize the lives that were saved, the hospital systems that were not overwhelmed, the ... illnesses that were avoided."

Throughout the conference, anti-government paranoia and misinformation about pandemic policies were strong on the wing. Rutgers biologist Bryce Nickels — who has accused scientists of "fraud" for concluding in a 2020 paper that COVID most likely originated in the natural spillover of the virus from animals via the wildlife trade in China, not through a laboratory experiment gone awry — expressed the conviction during the panel on the origins of COVID that "the pandemic was caused by reckless research and a lab accident." No evidence has ever surfaced to support that theory.

Nickels insinuated that the scientists behind such research "have blood on their hands or culpability in some level."

I asked Bhattacharya by email if comments such as Nickels' and Noymer's comported with his desire to eradicate from the debate over COVID "the goal ... to destroy people who disagree with you." He didn't reply.

Levin told me by email that "revisiting pandemic policies, with the benefit of hindsight and data, is a valuable topic for study," and that he thinks "we'll learn more from that inquiry if we frame it around questions and evidence rather than 'who was right.'"

Some presenters uttered evident misinformation. Consider Scott Atlas, a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and a former COVID advisor to the Trump administration, who attacked pandemic lockdowns and their advocates because lockdowns "failed to stop the dying, they failed to stop the spread — that's the data."

But this is a flagrant category error. No one argued that the lockdowns would stop the spread of COVID or "stop the dying." They were consistently portrayed as policies to slow the spread and consequently mortality in order to relieve the crushing pressure on healthcare facilities and personnel long enough to

enable them to get a handle on the pandemic — "flattening the curve" was the watchword. And over time, they succeeded in doing just that.

Then there's Marty Makary, a prominent surgeon at Johns Hopkins University who made a name for himself during the pandemic by repeatedly predicting that the pandemic was on the verge of ending due to natural immunity, only to be consistently confounded by the appearance of successive new waves of deadly COVID variants.

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Makary related during the opening panel that he was frustrated because once data arrived about the social effects of lockdowns "there was no interest in evaluating" what was "the largest public health intervention in modern history."

But that's just wrong. Data-driven analyses of social interventions surfaced even in the earliest days of the pandemic — including a multidiscipinary symposium *sponsored by Stanford* in the fall of 2021, featuring 54 experts from academia, public health and government.

Up to this day, the medical, public health and social effects of the pandemic and pandemic policies have been the subject of unrelenting study — more than 700,000 papers by nearly 2 million researchers thus far, according to an estimate offered by Stanford epidemiologist John P.A. Ionannidis in his closing conference remarks.

The conference organizers wanted to congratulate themselves for producing

what Bhattacharya described as “the first event where people of very different viewpoints about what happened during the pandemic are going to speak to each other in a way that’s constructive.”

But a conference in which conspiratorial delusions and outright falsehoods were treated as deserving the same respect as scientifically validated research, and in which the authors of serious virological and epidemiological studies, as well as respected public health authorities, were subjected to smears, was nothing like “constructive.”

Considering Bhattacharya’s expectation that this conference should be a model for others, then: Let’s hope not.

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**Michael Hiltzik**

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